

Artistic Licence

VraieEsprit

Bleach

Abandoned



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Artistic Licence

VraieEsprit

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Summary

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Description

I needed to get this out of my system before the manga drives me nuts. An omake about Kira and Rose's first meeting with one another following the chaos of the Winter War. Kubo isn't gonna write it, so I decided to... Omake. Because Rose is a kickass character who deserves much more fan attention, and Kira is an epic VC who also currently needs lots of fan love!

1. The Night Before

Artistic Licence

(a mini omake about Rose, Kira and their meeting)

Disclaimer: I should be writing Sukuse, but after the recent manga I needed to get this out of my system. This seemed a more positive outlet than ranting at unsuspecting reviewers (gives them cookies) and people on forums! Whilst the futures/fates of Kira and Rose are both currently uncertain, I wanted to drabble the ‘how they met’ scenario. Basically because I was waiting for Kubo to do it, and he hasn’t, and probably won’t, so I will. And then I’ll go back to Sukuse. Promise.

Disclaimer 2: Any references to Rose’s ‘past’ or ‘Academy’ or any of those things are my own invention, not canon. There’s nothing in canon to say when he was at the Academy or what division(s) he recruited to. He might’ve been in Third all along — who knows?
Am leaving this story open ended in case I have more rant-outletting to do in the not-so-distant future.

Disclaimer 3: Despite the huge plethora of shounen-ai conversations I’ve had with friends about Rose and Kira following Rose’s manga speech, this story isn’t actively going there. Though there may be... well... subtle nudges... for those who want to see them. And for those who don’t, there won’t. Fair enough? :)

Disclaimer 4: These are really scenes rather than continuous flow... rather like **Meifu’s Prequel** and **Mirror Flower Water Moon**. If you haven’t read those... Please do =D There are cookies in it for you!

1

The Night Before

“You’re really going to go, aren’t you?”

The girl sank down against the wall with a sigh, twisting her fingers absently around the braid of dark hair that fell over her left shoulder. “You’ve made up your mind already — you’re going to go with Shinji and Kensei, aren’t you?”

“Lisa?” The fair-haired, slender young man glanced up from where he had been silently fingering chords on a worn but well-loved looking guitar, casting her a look of surprise. “Where did you come

from? I had thought you were with Hiyori, and...”

“You aren’t answering,” Lisa swiped her hand swiftly across the top of his head, causing him to yelp and glare at her in indignation.

“What was that for? I only made a comment! You almost hit the guitar, and if you knocked a hole in it, the tuning would go all out again! Bad enough I had to restring the whole thing when we got back, but now...”

“So shut up whining about that thing an’ tell me what I wanna know,” Lisa was unsympathetic. “Look me in the eye, Ootoribashi, an’ tell me you’re goin’ to Seireitei or you’re not. Words of one syllable, if y’like — but I want to hear it from you.”

“Oh. That?” Rose’s brows twitched together faintly in consternation, then he sighed, reaching his left hand up to rub his temples pensively. “Yes, if that’s what you’ve heard already. I’m going to go back there. Why? I didn’t think it was such a strange idea. Shinji and Kensei made up their minds days ago and you haven’t said a word about them.”

“They’re not you — you’re not them,” Lisa said abruptly. “We all know that Seireitei ain’t got the best of memories for any of us, but them two, they’ll be fine. They’ll tough it out, stomp all over it an’ the shinigami too, I imagine. You’re different... and besides, Love an’ I ain’t gonna be there to keep an eye on you when you daydream off into some harmonious wonderland and start writing chords instead of remembering to eat or sleep.”

“I’m not a child, you know!” Rose’s frown deepened, and he shook his head. “If you’d forgotten, I’ve been a Captain before. I’ve done it, and...”

“An’ look how that worked out for you,” Lisa said bluntly. “Look, I’m not judging your abilities. Kinshara’s a kickass bitch of a sword and I know why the Gotei want you back. I just... dunno whether it’s a good idea for you to go, s’all. We went through holy shit the last time, an’ it took you longer’n most of us to get the demon in check. You fought it... struggled with it — you remember? In different ways to the rest of us. An’ it was a bad time. Besides, Aizen was a friend o’ yours in school, too, an’ I know it hit you badly, when the whole thing sunk in. Now you want to go back to that place — have you forgotten how often you came to hide out at Eighth or Seventh when your VC was shrieking for you at the top of her decibel range? You said at least once a week that she’d drive you to quit or drown yourself, whichever proved to have the least paperwork — and yet now you want to go

back?"

"That was then," Rose's expression became pensive. "I have had assurance from Genryuusai-sama that the current Vice Captain of Third is a well-mannered, intelligent young man who works hard and has a good track record of absolute loyalty where his superiors are concerned. I wouldn't go back, if I thought I was going to be deafened at all times of the day and night, but this Kira Izuru sounds harmless enough. Besides, I want to go back."

"Why?" Lisa looked flawed, and Rose arched an eyebrow.

"You don't?" he asked archly. "You confronted your old Captain, renewed your acquaintance and yet you don't want to go back?"

"No place for me, now. We both moved on," Lisa said dismissively, though her cheeks reddened slightly at her friend's innuendo. "I'm fond of him, don't get me wrong — but we're not like we were before. We've seen, done, been too much else outside of the Gotei now. Even if Nanao-chan wasn't in my old slot, I dunno if I'd go back. To be honest, I didn't expect you too, either. You always seem so much more relaxed here than you ever did there."

"Possibly," Rose admitted, "but the past is the past and I want to bring it to closure. I was born in Seireitei, Lisa. I come from there. I left because I had to, and I didn't have a choice to go back till now. True, I didn't think I ever would... but it's different, now. Hiyori's life is thanks to them, and I know that Genryuusai-sama didn't agree with our sentence of execution, even though he hadn't any way of fighting against Central 46, then. Us, Urahara, everything could've been tracked down and destroyed a long time before if Genryuusai-sama really wanted it. Instead he's taken the chance to offer us peace and repatriation, because now he can do it. I respect him for wanting to breach the gap — and for making the first move to do it. Ichigo's existence means the Gotei have accepted Vaizards. Our death order is repealed... so I'll go back."

"It's fine that way, isn't it?"

The room's final occupant shoved his thick hands into the pocket of his tracksuit trousers, entering the conversation for the first time as he glanced between his two friends huddled down by the far window. "It's as Rose said, Lisa. It's up to him. He's fine, now. And the Gotei need to see the Vaizard as we are. Damn strong and able to hold our own. Aizen's plot proves shit happens, and it happens with speed. There'll be more to come, that's for sure. We've all been shinigami long enough to know battles are never over, only postponed. They

need our kind of strength, and the old guy's stepped up and said so. Might go myself, you know, had Seventh been open again — but as it is, Shinji, Kensei and Rose seem the right vanguard to send. Shinji's smart, Kensei's tough, and this one," he jerked a foot in Rose's direction, "is so mellow and strung up on the music score that they'll not know what hit them when he releases. Couldn't be a better array of our skills."

"Yes, but Love..." Lisa broke off, and Rose let out a heavy sigh.

"I want to go home," he admitted. "I know you don't understand why, and maybe I don't, either. It's not as though I have family to call on, nor many good memories of there. The people I care about most are here, or dead and gone before me. I was betrayed there, more than once, and hurt many times. We all were. We were sent to hell and back, and forced to face our most base instincts in a vulnerable, public arena, losing every shred of ourselves and our sanity... I know. But... maybe that's why I need to go. In this world, we're in limbo. We don't belong here. The gigai are a lie. We can live, but we don't belong. And... maybe it's foolish, but... there are things about being part of life I miss."

He strummed his fingers casually across the strings of the guitar, then,

"Inspiration comes from life, and seeing and feeling the things around you, not being afraid of them and hiding away," he added. "I'm not an exile any more. I'm a shinigami, and I'm a Vaizard. And I'll be a Gotei Vaizard, too, in a few days. I'll miss the people staying here — especially you two — but Kensei and Shinji will be there and besides..."

He pursed his lips together, then offered a pained smile.

"I can survive on my own, if I need to," he murmured. "I don't like to fight, or to kill, or to get involved in all of those messy, barbaric squalls if I can avoid it... they're aesthetically soul destroying and the clashing tones make my head ache. But I can do it, and will, if and when it's needed. My music has more reason to be there than here, right now. Soul Society is in tatters after the last battle and it's the best time to go in. I know what I'm doing, Lisa-chan. I'm grateful for your concern, but really... it's absolutely fine."

"Then I guess there's nothing left but t'help you pack," Lisa sighed, but nodded her head as though beaten. "Just don't come cryin' back here, if you find this..what did you call him? Kira? guy is a pain."

"A hundred years have passed since I last wore the *haori*, Lisa-

chan,” Rose said comfortably. “He might find that I’m the pain, not the other way around.”

“He’s bound to find that,” Love said gruffly, and there was a glitter of amusement behind the other’s dark glasses. “It comes from knowing you... and living with your artistic mood swings. There’s a reason folk started calling you the Vaizard of the Opera, y’know... and I’m sure even the most reasonable of adjutants will still object if you start singing arpeggios before the dawn chorus has a chance to get warmed up.”

“I won’t dignify that with an answer,” Rose got gracefully to his feet, sliding the guitar strap over his shoulder and gripping the neck firmly between his thin, elegant fingers. “And I can pack by myself, Lisa-chan. I don’t have much to take with me. Hardly anything at all, in fact.”

“When do you leave?” Lisa asked softly, and Rose frowned.

“Tomorrow night, the Gate is going to be opened. That’s what Urahara-san said,” he replied slowly. “He said it will open at his place, to make it less noticeable, and everything will happen from there. Genryuusai-sama’s confirmed the arrangements, so all that we have to do is turn up there, around midnight. You don’t need to be there, though... I mean...”

“We’ll come,” Love said gruffly, reaching across to clap his more delicately built friend on the shoulder and almost sending him and the guitar sprawling. “If just t’see you in Shinigami threads again — we’ll be there, won’t we, Lisa?”

“If you smash my guitar, you won’t be in any state to do anything, Aikawa Love!” Rose glowered at him, genuine indignation glittering in his normally dreamy gaze, and Love laughed.

“If it’s so easy to break, you should train it better. Toughen it up, else it won’t last two seconds back in Seireitei.” he said, unconcerned, and Rose snorted, sending him a long-suffering glance.

“You never have understood the finer points of my art, have you?” he asked defeatedly, and Love shrugged his shoulders.

“Not really into the frills and fancies, if you catch my drift, so I’ll leave it with you,” he said easily. “But we will see you off, guitar and all. Shinji and Kensei, too. We’ll all go. Jus’ to remind you three that you’re Vaizard, not shinigami, and that’s where your loyalties are first and foremost.”

“My loyalties are as they’ve always been,” Rose regathered his

composure, offering his friend a faint smile. “With the people who’ve kept faith with me through thick and through thin. I don’t hold grudges against Seireitei, and I will go back with an open mind, because I don’t want to cause confrontation. However, I know who my friends have always been, and they’re right here. I won’t forget — I’m not so fickle as that.”

2. Poetry In Motion

2

Poetry in Motion

The morning's class had been a long one.

Kira Izuru walked slowly along the narrow, winding path that led back towards his home division, a look of preoccupation on his thin features. It was a beautiful day, at the height of spring, and the trees all around him had burst into bloom, the alluring scent of the fading plum blossoms and the cresting sakura giving the warm air a heady perfume. In the grounds of the Academy, students were already milling around the dense patches of trees, settling themselves beneath the branches so as best to enjoy the pinkish clouds that half-obscured the delicate blue sky. Their laughter drifted across towards him on the breeze, reminding him of his own Academy days, yet his expression only darkened, his steps becoming heavier as he drew closer to the heart of the Gotei conclave.

Students were always at their worst at the start and the end of term, and this was no exception.

He sighed, pausing at the main entrance of the Gotei conclave and leaning up against one of the substantial pillars, pushing his heavy fringe out of his face and rubbing his brow as if by doing so he could erase the lines that seemed to have become permanent fixtures since the close of the Winter War. No, he corrected himself bitterly, it had been before that — ever since he had been forced to do the duty of two officers instead of one and lead the Third Division on his own.

In some ways, he had relished the duty, for it had allowed him to avoid considering the terrifying truth about the Captain in whom he had placed all his trust and faith. The crises of conviction that afflicted him during the dark hours of the night, alone in his room had become less and less frequent as he had piled on the work, pushing himself to keep going until he literally dropped from exhaustion. Some nights he did not even leave his office, huddling over his desk with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders to catch thirty minutes respite between piles of documents. His friends had commented on it, some light-heartedly, some with deeper concern, but their interventions had usually led to long nights of drinking, heavy hangovers and twice the workload awaiting him when he finally managed to drag himself back

to sobriety.

Ichimaru's betrayal had been frightening, but the War — and his own inadequacy — that had been more terrifying still. Even now he could picture the blooded, broken bodies of his comrades, his own desperate attempts to remember healing spells and maintain barriers strong enough to prevent them from death. He had succeeded, but only he knew how close he had come to failing, and although many officers had complimented him on his actions, the fine words had only made him doubly determined to apply himself.

He glanced at the aging book he had been carrying under his arm, skimming over the elegant old scripted kanji that decorated the spine with a sigh. If truth were told, he had not been in the mood for haiku class that morning, either. It had been an honour when the Academy had originally invited him to come and lecture the students on something so dear to his heart, but today the thirty or so second years he had had in his charge had been more interested in picking their spots to watch the flowers, and his mind had been half on the important missive that had arrived just before he had left the barracks.

Normally, he would have opened such an official looking envelope immediately, but he had fallen asleep over the tax returns and had only just managed to scramble himself together to get to the school on time for his lecture. It was rare for Seireitei to issue letters rather than Hell Butterflies, but in peacetime, and on particularly special occasions, it had been known to happen. Kira did not know what the envelope contained, but he suspected it would involve him and some new amount of work and he sighed, putting the book of Matsuo Basho's best haiku back under his arm and turning reluctantly back in the direction of Third Division.

I suppose that this is what being a Vice Captain is really about.

He pressed his lips together until they formed a thin, grim line.

Ichimaru-ta... Ichimaru did so much without seeming to do anything, I never really understood. If I can't keep up with it, well, then it just means that I was never really the right choice for this job, doesn't it? Ichimaru chose me because Aizen told him to, and Aizen wanted me because he felt I'd be gullible enough to let whatever happen. The killer is that I was... and then some.

He passed the stump of a persimmon tree, gazing at it impassively as he took in the roughly hewn edges that had seen the trunk brought toppling to the ground. Wabisuke's blade had been blunted

considerably by the savagery of the attack, but he had not been able to help himself. The tree was a memory, the last of the forest of persimmon trees his former Captain had planted and tended, and one particularly dark day Kira had expunged that memory, sending the remaining fruit scattering all around.

I never did like that tree. It was his, and now it's gone, just like him, and good riddance. I want to forget that time, and all it did was make me remember my shortcomings. Raising my sword against Hinamori-kun, not realising that my Captain was wrapped up in murder... and then...

“Fukutaichou!”

As he stepped over the threshold of his division, a welcome distraction from his dark thoughts made him turn, seeing the Division's sixth seated officer, Katakura Asuka hurrying towards him, dark hair flapping in the breeze and an urgent expression on his face.

“Fukutaichou, we've been looking all over for you! Rikuu-san thought you were in your office, but we looked, and you weren't, and then...”

“Looking for me?” Kira stared at the other man blankly. “I was at the Academy, as I am this time every Wednesday. Togakushi should know that... I'm sure I briefed him last night after our usual meeting.”

“I don't know, sir, but I guess... with everything... maybe he... forgot,” Katakura spoke carefully, as if certain Kira had done no such thing, but too tactful to say so to his superior's face, and indeed, as Kira racked his brains, he realised that he had no memory of such a conversation taking place. “In any case, sir, I think... it's important you go inside. Now, sir. I don't mean to be impertinent, but... well...”

He trailed off, an unreadable expression on his features, and before Kira could open his mouth to reply, the distinctive sound of piano music wafted across the courtyard to where the two men were standing. Kira's brows knitted together in confusion, and he cast Katakura a mystified look. Katakura returned it with a troubled one, saluting his superior officer before disappearing into shunpo, and Kira found himself once more alone in the courtyard. The haunting melody was growing louder and more emphatic with every passing moment, and as he approached the building with more than his usual wary caution, the windows of the Captain's office suddenly banged open by themselves, making him physically jump and wrap his hand around Wabisuke's hilt, his heart in his throat as he gazed around him frantically for the source of what he had been sure was some kind of attack.

For a moment, he did not dare move, then, as the melody reached its crescendo, he gathered his courage, inching closer to the room which had been shut up and locked since the day Ichimaru had left the Gotei for good. It had been one of Kira's strictest rules, that no member of the division should encroach on the room tainted by the betrayal of their previous leader, and until that day, nobody had dared break it.

But there was no mistaking it. Today someone was inside the Captain's office, and as he calmed, Kira found his anxiety replaced by the indignant anger of one who had had less than five hours sleep in a week. Shoving the hapless haiku volume into his obi with more force than was necessary, he stomped into the building, determined to take whoever it was by surprise and scare the living daylights out of them for breaking the seal on the room.

As he drew closer, the melody began to die away, and Kira almost thought he could hear the sound of someone humming on the other side of the door. Placing his hand against the divide, he pressed his ear close to the join, trying to work out who could be inside, but the airy swirl of reiatsu was alien to his senses. Something pungent invaded his nostrils as he breathed in and he coughed, almost choking on the unfamiliar scent of incense. Unable to take it any more, he grabbed hold of the door handle in his right hand, covering his face with his left sleeve to protect him from the smoke and flinging open the divide with a resolutely indignant Vice Captain's bang.

"What on earth is going on in..." he began, then faltered, his eyes becoming huge as he took in the scene within. The ill-used book that had been stuffed into his obi tumbled loose, falling to the floor with a thud, but Kira did not even notice, unable to tear his disbelieving gaze away from the interior of the Captain's office.

Ichimaru's study had been neat, tidy and impersonal, with very few clues about the man who had lived and worked from there. Kira had visited it frequently, and had known every nook and cranny, yet now he felt as though he had stepped into an alien world. The tatami mat floor was covered with a hessian rug woven from strips of various colours, whilst an embroidered silk coverlet had been draped over Ichimaru's plain, stark desk, cascading into a neat, artistically arranged pool of colour against the dull beige of the floor. The shelves which had held Gin's books now sported a large origami crane suspended from a thin length of silk thread from between the ceiling tiles, and it was surrounded on both sides by dogeared manuscript books and several volumes of an unfamiliar manga series. A guitar was propped up in the corner that ran alongside the window, more

manuscript paper piled up beside it along with a stack of notes written in a curly, unfamiliar hand. Above it hung a scroll with the calligraphic character 「芸」 slashed in bold black ink, the borders decorated with a fine lacework pattern in burgundy and brown. Only the filing cabinets had not been overwhelmed by this sudden invasion of colour, yet Kira could not help but notice the gaudy incense burner that sat atop it, the thin trail of smoke creating intricate patterns in the breeze from the window.

All of this was jaw-dropping enough, but it was the room's sole inhabitant that really took Kira's breath away. A young man, slender of build sat cross legged on a silk-covered cushion. A black scabbard and a gold hilted sword hovering in cross formation before his body, reminding Kira of a snake charmer he had once seen in a film Renji had forced him to watch at some ungodly hour after a particularly torrid night on the town. A tousled cloud of fair hair framed a narrow face, and long, elegant fingers moved as if in time to the music — or no, Kira half thought they were *playing* the music, though there was no instrument he could see. The man's eyes had been closed, as though lost in the melodies, but at Kira's entrance they had opened, revealing a dreamy lavender gaze that flitted towards him in curious interest.

It was at that moment that Kira realised that the man was wearing a *haori*, and, as the stranger got to his feet, re-sheathing his sword and sliding it into his obi, he saw the distinctive three slashes of the division's number emblazoned on the back of the crisp white fabric.

His vocal chords froze, as suddenly he realised what the important message still lying unopened on his desk probably referred to.

"Matsuo Basho?" The man bent to pick up the fallen book, glancing at the cover and then offering Kira a pensive smile. "I've read some of his work, though I have to admit I find more pleasure in the older *waka* and *renga* verse. Fujiwara no Teika is a particular favourite of mine... the Takasago pines and Onoe cherries, you know."

He held the book out, and Kira took it wordlessly.

"You must be Kira Izuru, I think?" The man was speaking again, and Kira struggled to reassert himself, scrabbling for his usual polite deference when faced with a Captain.

Even a Captain who apparently likes to play music on his sword and meditate with incense.

"Yes... sir?" He could not prevent the slight note of doubt creeping into the last syllable, and the stranger offered him a rueful smile.

“Perhaps we should begin again,” he suggested softly. “My name is Ootoribashi Roujuurou, and I’m the new Third Division Captain. At least, I will be, this time tomorrow, when the official inauguration is complete. As I knew where I was coming, though, I thought it wouldn’t hurt to come meet people and settle my belongings early. I didn’t want to be any trouble, so I let myself in — your Third and Sixth Seated Officers have been extremely helpful in setting up the office.”

He glanced around at the décor, and then sighed, an expression of nostalgia touching his expression.

“It was so cold and empty when I arrived,” he murmured, more than half to himself. “Now, though, I almost feel as though I’ve come home.”

He turned back to Kira, casting him another of those strange, half dreamy, half pensive smiles.

“I believe Genryusai-sama was sending messages to the Third, Fifth and Ninth to expect our arrival?”

“I...” Again Kira berated himself for not having opened that note before leaving for the Academy. “Unfortunately, sir, I didn’t receive it before I left the barracks this morning. I was at the Academy, and well, I’ve only just returned.”

“I see,” The other man’s face cleared. “Well, that explains why you’re looking at me with such a pussystruck expression. Still, though, I promise not to be any trouble. This is still your Division, at least until tomorrow — I just wanted to settle some century old nerves and see how it felt to be back. You don’t mind?” this last with hesitation, and Kira shook his head hurriedly.

“No, sir. Please, the fault is mine. I should have... I ought to have... the message was...”

“Genryusai-sama said you’re a good and efficient Vice Captain, and your officers were highly complimentary of your skills with the division,” His companion said thoughtfully. “It’s a lot of work, though, for one man, isn’t it? Well, from tomorrow, your workload will halve. I believe in doing my fair share.”

He smiled, tapping the Basho book.

“It seems you’re a man with some artistic sensibilities, and I feel that we will have many, many interesting discussions as we spend more time together,” he ruminated. “My previous Vice Captain was... shall we say... not particularly fond of anything artistic, and she and

I... often didn't agree on things. She was an exceptionally efficient lady... in her own way... but I feel already that you and I will have a much more productive working relationship. A man without art is a man without soul — but you clearly have soul, so I can put my mind at rest."

"Well, I like haiku," Kira half-wondered if somehow he'd fallen asleep again and this was some strange, surreal dream. "I mean, I'm not averse to... and well... it's very... cheerful in here, now."

"Isn't it?" The Captain beamed. "It took almost twelve years for me to get my office exactly as I wanted it last time, and then I lost it all when I was forced to leave. Imagine my surprise and joy when I found so many of my old nick-nacks tucked away in the cupboard over there,"

He flung an expressive hand in the direction of the back of the room, where a door that Ichimaru had always kept locked was standing somewhat ajar.

"I didn't realise... that door had a key," Kira murmured, and Roujuurou shrugged his shoulders.

"Genryuusai-sama gave me a full set when I left his office," he explained. "In that regard I think I'm prepared — although I will be wanting full reports from you, of course, about the current Third and its membership. I like to know all of my members by name...speaking of which, I like your name. Izuru... isn't it? Tell me, how do you write that? It has a lovely rhythm to it — almost melodic."

"Is it?" Kira blinked. "It's not written any special way, sir. Just... with katakana, that's all. In syllables. I-zu-ru. That's all."

"I see," Roujuurou sighed, looking disappointed. "What a shame — I was hoping it had some deep poetic meaning. Still, never mind. I should like to call you that — if you have no objection? I realise it's very forward of me when we've only just met, but I do feel that the vibes between people are important, and it has such a nice ring to it. It rolls off the tongue — do you mind?"

"Izuru,"

Kira's lips thinned for a moment, his brow knitting together as an image of his former Captain flashed unbidden through his thoughts, the teasing, lazy sound of Gin's voice penetrating his senses. His eyes darkened slightly, then resolution flooded through him, and he shook his head, raising his gaze to meet his new Captain's with determination.

“No, sir, it’s fine,” he said levelly. “You’re my Captain, and so however you wish to call me is acceptable.”

“Good. Then Izuru it is,” The newcomer seemed pleased. “Now, come in and sit down. We’ll have tea and you can share with me your theories on Matsuo Basho’s haiku.”

3. Dreams of the Penitent

3

Dreams of the Penitent

The wind whipped ominously around the Third Division barracks as the petite young woman launched her sword at the man in the haori with an ear-splitting shriek of rage and pain. A blur of colours, sounds, flashes, and the next thing he knew he was in her line of fire, Wabisuke's hooked claw of a blade sweeping down to meet the sparking edges of Tobiume, his attention fixed on nothing but protecting his Captain from harm. The sound of metal against metal rang out in the otherwise eerie silence of the moonlit compound, and from a distance, silent and leering, the Captain simply watched, an unpleasant detachedness to his smile as his Vice Captain battled in his name.

There should have been a chill of cold in the midst of the fight, a flurry of chilled reiatsu and the swift swing of a stronger blade to drive the two fighting shinigami apart. There should have been the flap of white bringing authority between them and barking out orders this way and that, yet it never came.

Instead, Wabisuke's deformed steel tongue licked hungrily at the slender, delicate neck of Kira's opponent, the grim spirit within urging him to let him taste blood. Caught up in the frenzy of the fight, Kira's arm moved almost before he knew it, and then there was nothing in his vision except a misty haze of crimson rain...

"Izuru!"

Suddenly hands were grabbing at his shoulders, and Kira felt himself being violently shaken awake. The wind and blood disappeared, to be replaced by the blank ceiling of his chamber, and he blinked, momentarily disorientated. The thin, vicelike fingers that had clamped themselves around his upper arms loosened their grip, and in the darkness, Kira heard someone let out a sigh of audible relief.

"Thank goodness. I thought you weren't going to wake."

There was a hiss of reiatsu, then the flicker of a carefully controlled lick of kidou flame, and in the wavering glow, Kira could make out the shadow of his Captain in the darkness. Discomfited at being seen in such disarray by his superior officer, he scrambled hurriedly into a

sitting position, almost managing to bash his head on the shelves above in his haste.

"I'm sorry, I startled you," Rose's voice was apologetic, and as Kira pulled his blankets more tightly around his body, he realised that the older man was also clad in night clothes, a lace-edged robe pulled hurriedly over the top and a casual floral band pulled back into the wispy strawberry blond hair. Yet it was the genuine concern that glittered in the lavender eyes that caught Kira's attention most strongly, and he shook his head, wanting to put the other at ease.

"No, sir. I'm sure the fault was mine. I think I was dreaming — I may have woken you."

"Mm," Rose's expression was unreadable for a moment, then he shrugged, extinguishing the kidou flame with an elegant flick of his hand as the Vice Captain fumbled to activate the bedside lantern. "I sleep lightly as a rule — a habit borne of long years anticipating danger, I suppose. However, it was your reiatsu that concerned me the most. It was fluctuating all over the place — it felt as though you were under some kind of attack."

"Attack?" Kira stared, taken aback, and Rose nodded, leaning up against the wall and folding his arms across his chest.

"Another sensation I have some experience of," he said succinctly. "I felt you were being assailed by something... and you were quite distressed when I came in, so perhaps I wasn't far wrong."

"It was... just a dream, sir." Kira lowered his gaze, suddenly embarrassed, and Rose shook his head.

"Dreams are warnings from the inner subconscious that something is tormenting our mental state," he said sagely. "If your equilibrium is unsettled, so will your work be. As a Captain, that's concerning. For Third Division, too. It's no good to anyone if our Vice Captain is not fit to perform his tasks."

"I assure you, sir, I am quite all right!" Kira's eyes opened wide with alarm and he held up his hands in protest. "I have dreams sometimes, but they don't interfere with my work. Really! And they don't usually disturb anyone, only the Captain's room has been empty, and..."

"I have heard, you know," Rose pressed his lips together, and for a moment Kira thought he saw more in the man's expression than the flighty, artistic spirit he had encountered in the office earlier that day. "I know what happened here... with Ichimaru Gin."

Despite his best efforts, Kira could not help flinching at the sound of the name, and Rose nodded.

“He betrayed you and the Third Division. The whole squad still seethes with resentment from unanswered grievances,” he said sadly. “They don’t speak of it, and the unspoken things are usually the ones that create the deepest rifts. You needn’t look so shamed or mortified, Izuru. I understand better than you think I do. Those who give their loyalty wholeheartedly are the ones who take longer to heal when betrayal’s long, ugly fingers touch them. You should not feel ashamed of that.”

“But I... I didn’t... know. I couldn’t see... I didn’t stop him,” Kira’s words came numbly, his tongue suddenly thick and unwieldy in his mouth. “I didn’t... and he hurt... my friend... and so many others. I... believed in him... and... but... he almost... destroyed everything.”

“A Vice Captain’s duty is to believe in and uphold his Captain’s will,” Rose said softly. “Ichimaru fooled a great many people. You should not carry the blame for his actions alone. I’ve no doubt what you say is true — but there is nothing to be resolved from clinging to the past and punishing yourself for it repeatedly.”

He sighed, turning towards the window and resting his hands on the sill.

“I understand betrayal especially well,” he murmured. “I wonder if you realise quite how well. I didn’t think I would ever come back here, you know... but I realise now, standing here and talking to you, that it was something I needed to do. You haven’t found closure for your betrayal yet. Standing here, with my record cleared and my rank restored... I realise that maybe... I have.”

Kira shot his companion a startled look.

“Betrayal, sir?”

“Mm,” A strange, haunted smile twitched at Rose’s lips, and he nodded. “Just thinking about it makes me want to compose a symphony of tragic harmonies, to be honest. Seeing it in your face makes my guitar long to sob in sympathy. I had assumed you knew why... what the special circumstances were, surrounding Kense... I mean, Muguruma-taichou and Hirako-taichou and my leaving and returning to office in this manner?”

“We weren’t told very much,” Kira admitted. “I saw... I mean... in the War, I know... you fought then. All of you — you and others... who aren’t here. I saw... you have... well... Hollow masks. Don’t

you?”

“Yes...” Rose agreed. “Yes, I suppose so. And that was all?”

“Mm-mm,” Kira shook his head. “There was a Hell Butterfly bulletin that explained that you’d been caught in the fall-out of one of Aizen’s illegal experiments and so had left office as a result of the Hollowfication. I don’t really know any more... just that it was before I was a shinigami.”

“A hundred years ago, or more, now,” Rose agreed gravely. “Yes, I suppose they had to tell you something. I did wonder if they would... and if they did, what you would think about having us return. I can’t imagine that, as a shinigami who trained to destroy Hollows, you welcomed the idea of having a Captain with a tendency to turn Hollow in battle.”

“It’s better than being stabbed in the back by one whilst they smile at you,” Kira muttered, then realised what he had said, clamping a hand over his mouth with a stricken look on his face. Rose smiled again, the same, half-troubled smile, and he nodded.

“Perhaps,” he agreed cautiously. “But I felt that, at some point, I wanted to discuss the truth of it with you. And... now, having seen how deep your scars from Ichimaru run, I feel that now would be as good a time as any. I want you to understand, you see, that we’ve both experienced betrayal, but we both are in a position to step forward and move on.”

“The truth, sir?”

Rose was silent for a long while, gazing out at the Third Division grounds, then,

“I understand that there are no persimmon trees left in Third Division’s grounds?”

“No, sir,” Kira reddened, shaking his head. “I’m afraid I might have... sanctioned them being used for Kidou target practice. All except the one in the front entrance. I cut that one down.”

“Mm,” Rose pursed his lips. “I understood that Ichimaru used to distribute dried persimmons to the other divisions. I wondered whether that was his impulse or the Third’s — I suppose now I have my answer.”

He shot Kira a conspiratorial smile.

“It’s quite all right, by the way,” he added. “I consider the persimmon an ugly tree, and I have no real taste for the fruit. The

land appears bare, however. Perhaps we could plant some plums or a willow or two? They have an aesthetic grace to them, and I always think them so gentle and relaxing to watch, their branches swaying in the breeze.”

“Taichou?” Kira’s brows knitted together. “I thought you wanted to talk about the reason you left Third Division?”

“Ah. Ah yes. Forgive me. Sometimes I become distracted,” Rose looked sheepish. “Seireitei is quiet and beautiful when at peace, and it stirs the muse inside me like nothing else. I have been surrounded by the truest friends for the past century, Izuru, but very little of beauty. The Real World has its merits, but when you spend most of your time sheltering in unsavoury locations, I confess the bulk of it passes you by. Ah well, I suppose it couldn’t be helped.”

He let out a worldly sigh, shrugging his shoulders.

“In any case, the eight of us who came to your aid during the War were all once members of the Gotei. You realised that, I think? Only three of us have come back, but all of us were once comrades in arms under the same banner.”

“Yes. Yes, I believe we were told that, too,” Kira agreed thoughtfully. “I remember Sasakibe-fukutaichou talking in a meeting about names being restored to the honour rolls of divisions, and so the subject was discussed a little then. Perhaps he knew more than we did — but he didn’t elaborate, and I don’t think we felt in a position to ask, with so much to do following the conflict.”

“When I was appointed Captain, Aizen Sousuke was a Vice Captain,” Rose said pensively. “Fifth Division’s, to be exact — under Hirako Shinji. He was also someone I once considered a friend — back during our Academy days, when none of us guessed what kind of a soul he was concealing beneath his kind words and smiles.”

He glanced at his hands.

“The experiment that we were caught up in was part of Aizen’s pursuit of power,” he said sadly. “We were used as test subjects for his theory, and then discarded. When the Gotei got to hear of the incident, Aizen had already covered his tracks. He framed Urahara Kisuke for everything, and Central 46 arrested him and Tsukabishi Tessai, sentencing both to harsh terms. In our case... it was decided that, as tainted souls, we were no longer fit for anything and should therefore be destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” Kira whitened. “You mean... killed?”

“Yes,” Rose agreed, turning to face his subordinate, a grave expression on his narrow features. “I have no memory of this, of course, but I know that with the help of Shihouin Yoruichi, Tessai-san and Urahara-san escaped, and brought us to the Real World. He worked hard to try to reverse the damage done to us, but it was impossible. Once the line between shinigami and Hollow is broken, it cannot be unbroken. Not even the Hougyoku was able to do that.”

He sighed again, and this time Kira could sense the genuine distress in his companion’s aura.

“We had no choice but to face head on what we had become,” he whispered. “Face it, fight it, and somehow, tame it. Otherwise, we would become full Hollow, and then...”

He shook his head, as though the memory was too bleak to recount.

“I thought I hated the Gotei, then. Shinigami, Soul Society... everything,” he said quietly. “I thought that we would never come back here. Yet now... after that battle... I see that I was wrong. The enemy was Aizen. Not Seireitei. Aizen was defeated. Ichimaru and Tosen too. Those who betrayed you and betrayed us were dealt with, and Soul Society was cleansed. The past hurts... I’m sure there are few shinigami who can say otherwise. But we rise above it and we fight on. That’s why I came back.”

He sent Kira a crooked smile.

“Maybe... when I heard about Ichimaru and how badly he’d scarred my Division, I felt protective and wanted to come put things to rights,” he reflected. “It’s strange — I never did have such a deep attachment to Third the last time. Twelve years is short in shinigami terms, and I was never a recruit to this division, so didn’t have time to put down roots. Yet now... this time around, I think it will be different. I can’t put my finger on it, precisely — but I rather like the vibe of the current Third.”

His grin widened.

“And I can honestly say that the Vice Captain is a huge improvement on the last time,” he added reflectively. “A man of intelligence and aesthetic awareness who listens well and answers eloquently is the kind of adjutant I would choose to have at my side.”

“Taichou!” Now there was no hiding Kira’s embarrassment, and Rose let out a soft chuckle.

“You aren’t good at taking compliments? Pity,” he mused. “I would’ve thought you’d be more adept at it, given that you have such

a fine reputation among the highers in Seireitei. I heard nothing but good about you between the first discussions about our return and the completion of the act — and I have seen no sign that I was deceived. And, so long as you are not horrified by my mask, of course... I hope I will be able to prove myself a better Captain than the previous incumbent.”

Kira was silent for a moment, then slowly he shook his head.

“Your mask is a Hollow mask, sir, but I know now why you have it, and I understand that it means you fought your demons and took control of them,” he said soberly. “I never knew what Ichimaru was thinking, right up till the last time he was here. In one day I feel... I understand better your way of seeing things than I ever did in twenty plus years in his service. I haven’t ever had a Captain to report to like that... but I’m starting to think that I might... like it better that way.”

“To feel trusted, perhaps?” Rose arched an expressive eyebrow, and Kira nodded.

“Yes,” he said fervently. “That exact thing. Ichimaru never trusted me.”

“Well, I think you’ll find I already have,” Rose looked pensive. “We were told not to discuss the Aizen incident or our experiences to our subordinates when we came back. I decided to defy that instruction, however. Lack of communication is a bad thing.”

He looked amused.

“My friends... the other Vaizard, they think that you’ll have more trouble with me than I will with you, and perhaps they’re right,” he admitted. “However, I’d rather you spoke to me about things than fretted on them by yourself. Even if the problem is me... understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Kira nodded his head. “I admit, I was... somewhat surprised when we met earlier. But... I don’t think there are any problems. Really I don’t. I don’t know how you were playing music without an instrument, and I think I’ll find it harder to locate folders or documents in your office than I did in Ichimaru’s... but... I can adjust to that.”

“Believe it or not, I’m quite organised,” Rose grinned, his sombre features lighting up at this. “Disorder is unsightly, and I prefer everything to look as it should. My filing system might be... eclectic — though my previous Vice Captain had other words for it — but once you understand it, I’m sure you’ll be able to locate everything just as quickly as before.”

“Well, I’ll do my best,” Kira agreed, folding the hem of the blanket absently between his fingers. ‘It will be nice to have some time to myself again, too — knowing I’m not carrying Third on my own any more. It’s not that I want to heap work on you in my place, sir,’ he added hurriedly, “but it’s as you said — a big strain, on your own.”

“Well, so long as you stop having nightmares and we can both sleep soundly, I’m sure that will suffice,” Rose’s eyes twinkled. “I don’t know who the friend was that Ichimaru put in danger, but I assume they recovered from the attack?”

“Hinamori Momo-san. She was Aizen’s Vice Captain, and Ichimaru tried to have her and I kill one another,” Kira said bitterly. “It might have worked, had Hitsugaya-taichou not stepped between us to pull us apart. Hinamori-san is my... I mean, we’ve been friends since... and I’d never... but I did, and even though she and I are still friends, I wish...”

Rose’s eyes widened for a moment, as if understanding some unspoken message in Kira’s words, then he nodded slowly.

“You are still friends,” he said simply. “All else can heal from that point. Your friend’s new Captain is a kind man, Izuru, but more than that, he’s a trustworthy man. He’s not aesthetic, and whilst his taste in music is passable, sometimes I have no idea what he’s thinking when he organises his wardrobe. However, for good heartedness, I know very few better. And more than anyone, Shinji... I mean, Hirako-taichou — was betrayed by Aizen. Your friend is Aizen’s former adjutant. S..Hirako-taichou is his former superior. Their bond of betrayal is stronger even than yours and mine. You can lay that guilt to rest and focus on rebuilding the happy parts of your friendship — she will be fine, and so will you.”

Kira offered the feeblest of smiles.

“Perhaps,” he acknowledged. “More because we have to be, than for any other reason.”

“Mm,” Rose did not try to contradict his assertion, and Kira saw once again that strange, half-sad, half haunted expression cross his companion’s features. He nodded, turning towards the door.

“I’ll let you sleep. We both need it, for tomorrow will be busy,” he reflected, pausing at the divide to cast the Vice Captain one last glance. “No more nightmares. The past is past, for both of us. From tomorrow, Third Division is reborn.”

He smiled, and this time the sadness did not entirely leave his eyes.

“Third Division’s motif is the marigold, and you know what it stands for,” he added, in tones carefully formulated for the maximum dramatic effect, ‘but Ootoribashi means ‘Bridge of the Phoenix’. I’m sure that means I can rise again from the ashes of despair — and so, Izuru, must you.”

With that he was gone, a waft of frilly robe drifting out of the door and, as the divide shut behind him, Kira lay back down on his bed, closing his eyes.

The blood mist was gone, and for the first time in a long time, the darkness did not feel so foreboding.

I’ve been alone a lot for a long, long time. Alone and worried, trying to fight through on my own. Alright, so he’s a little... eccentric... and the way he says things makes him sound like he’s writing a novel... but its also rather refreshing. It might be nice to operate as a team... for once, to really be appreciated as Vice Captain of the Third Division.

4. The Debts of Memory

4

The Debts of Memory

The grass was a carpet of delicate pinks and fading whites as Rose picked his way between the rows of tree trunks, pausing momentarily to gaze up at the final few late blossoms that clung to the branches. A warm spring breeze carried the hazy scent of the new season, marking the end of the frosts, and a faint smile touched his lips, as though he too had stepped through winter and managed at last to thaw into spring.

Well, Seireitei. Here I am.

His elegant, long fingers brushed against the crisp new fabric of the haori, and he pressed his lips together in a thoughtful, half-dreamy expression. That morning, the formal inauguration of the three new Captains had taken place, and now, once more, the role of protecting and leading the Third Division fell to him. Yet as his memory flitted back to the last time, more than a century earlier, he realised how different his emotions were today than they had been then.

I never expected to be a Captain, yet I became one anyway. And because I became one, I became a Vaizard. One fate led to another — but I can't say now that I regret it.

He closed his eyes, remembering the day that he had first been told of his nomination. He had not believed it, he remembered absently. It had all seemed so very farfetched and unreal.

“Me? A Gotei Captain? Of Third Division?”

He could hear his own voice, echoing his friend's words in bemused, parrot repetition. Lisa's laugh rippled through his thoughts, as she cuffed him lightly across the head.

“You don't need t'make it sound like it's secondment to the depths of hell,” she had scolded. “Third ain't all that bad. They need a Captain, an' the Taichou's recommended you for the job.”

“You're joking,” Rose had stared at her apprehensively, and Lisa had shaken her head, braids twitching against the black of her *shihakushou*.

“Heard him do it myself,” she said simply. “Word's been put about

that you're a good candidate, and you should've expected it to come."

"But..."

"What the hell d'ya think the point of doing Bankai training was, then?" Lisa's eyebrow had arched behind her dark rimmed glasses. "Achieving Bankai is pretty much an application for Captaincy. Taichou's seen that and he's put you forward. You've gotta stop pullin' back and go for what you want — what you ought to have. I'm serious, Rose. You can't hide here behind us forever."

"I never said I was hiding," Rose saw himself turn away from her, unwilling to meet her eyes as she had hit far too close to the mark in the way she often did. "If this is about that Vice Captaincy..."

"I've said nothing about that, but if you brought it up, it means you're still flapping about whether you did right, not going," Lisa had cut across him pragmatically. "Still, now you can't pretend you're not ready to take some responsibility."

"But... I've never been... ranked over you."

"An' you an' I are different," Lisa had said matter-of-factly. "Let's face it, Rose, I'm from Rukongai. Rukongai people, well, sometimes we come up good, but a lot of the time we're fighting it from behind. Nobody gives us anything, we have to work and the chances of us attaining Bankai are low. We don't have the same pure genes you Seireitei folks do, so it's harder. Not impossible, just harder, an' even if we do make it, the chances of being taken seriously aren't great. It's just how things are. Taichou knows it, too. But I'm happy, here. He trusts me an' I get the jobs I want. I'm tough and I can fight and he knows what I can do, so he lets me get on and do it. I wouldn't want to leave, even if I had the option to. But you..."

"You don't want to leave Eighth, but you'd like me to get out?" Rose had asked acerbically, and had received a more forceful slap about the head for his trouble.

"Idiot, I just don't want you held back on my or anyone else's account, and nor does Taichou," she had told him brusquely. "Besides, you should resign yourself to it. Taichou put you forward, but if Taichou recommends someone, Ukitake-taichou will probably second, and Love'll be speaking up on your behalf too, most likely. I dunno who they'll get to ratify you, but your Kidou is good, your shunpo fine, you lead patrols in Eighth all the time and as of recently, you can Bankai. They probably know all about it, so it'll be a formality. Make up your mind to go and do it right, Ootoribashi. It's where you've worked hard to be... so damn well man up and go there!"

He opened his eyes, a wry smile touching his pale lips.

This time it was in reverse. She was worried, wanting me to stay... and I was wanting to go. Things are different, though. I've learned much more and last night... talking to Izuru... made me realise how much. This is right, being here now. I've made peace with it. Perhaps because being a Vaizard has finally let me put all my demons to rest. Everything that's always swirled inside of me... at last, all the strains are coming together into a perfect harmony.

He gazed down at his hands, extending his fingers slowly and moving them speculatively as though preparing to play chords on the piano, then lowered them.

I am in harmony. I understand who I am now. There's no confusion left. Just... Ootoribashi Roujuurou. And if I can overcome those doubts and hesitations, I must help Izuru to do the same. Just like me, he has darkness he's fighting... I have to help him bring those things into vivid focus. Hopefully without the dramatic interlude of my own experiences, of course.

He paused as he reached his destination; the finely carved slab of marble decorated in a confetti of pink petals, and he bent to sweep the worst of it aside, his gesture gentle and measured, as though the stone beneath was sentient and understood that he was there.

"Well, sensei, here I am," he murmured, the smile on his face reflecting faintly in his sombre eyes. "I wanted to come back, just once, so you knew that I had faced my demons and overcome them. All of them, now. You began it, but now... at last... I can stand here and say that... I am the one in charge of them, not the other way around."

There was no answer, just the swish of the wind through the trees, yet Rose felt he could see her long braid of smooth dark hair, the gentle grey eyes beneath thick dark lashes, the fair skin and the kind smile that had always reassured him, no matter what. He stretched out a slender index finger, running it into the worn grooves of the kanji for 'moon'.

He could picture himself, the young boy, robed in the white and blue of the Academy, hair tousled and eyes shadowed from lack of sleep, his face white and drawn and his arms clutching his robe defensively around his body. The fear and uncertainty from that time lapped against the edges of his consciousness, but it could no longer enter. The spread of a bird's wings and the haunting melody of the harplike Kinshara drew together to keep it at bay, fighting in tandem to protect him instead of contributing to his confusion.

“The screams of a dummy hollow, the clashing of blades... all these things deafen me.” The fragile, frightened boy had spoken those words what seemed like a lifetime ago. *“I don’t like them. They’re not... not in harmony with each other and it hurts.”*

“Then you have to find a way to bring them into harmony.”

Her soft voice, melodic and unthreatening had responded, a gentle hand ruffling itself briefly through his muzzy fair hair *“You have that strength, I think. It’s there, inside of you. You just don’t know how to begin, that’s all.”*

Well, Sensei. I have begun. And this time, I mean to go on.

Rose bowed his head solemnly towards the stone monument, claspng his hands together in a momentary gesture of prayerful respect, then he turned, *haori* flapping slightly in the breeze as he walked back along the pink-specked pathway towards the heart of Seireitei. It was not a long walk, taking him directly alongside the Academy which had held so many mixed memories for him, and for a moment he paused at the fence, his gaze running over the high stone walls.

Aizen Sousuke.

The lavender eyes narrowed, first with anger, then with sadness and regret.

I can’t change the things that happened since, but I think... I would like to remember that, at least from my perspective, we were once friends. I would like to remember... the person who stood up for me when others did not, befriended me when others mocked me... and most of all, believed in me when I did not believe in myself. I want to believe that Aizen Sousuke existed once, too — just like that scared, shattered Ootoribashi Roujuurou existed. Time changed us — events maybe, too. But whatever made you turn on us... I’d like to forgive you. Whatever it was... it made me stronger. It helped me find who I really am, so I intend to move on. Third Division, Izuru and I have much to do in the weeks and months ahead. I shall not waste precious time hanging on to old grudges.

“You’re a long way from home, wandering out here,”

A friendly voice made him start and he turned, a warm smile spreading across his thin features as he took in the sturdy form of the Ninth Division Captain, thick arms folded resolutely across his broad chest. *“Well? This is a bit of a detour from the Third Division barracks — don’t tell me you’re running to hide from your Fuku already?”*

“Hide? From Izuru?” Rose blinked, then he laughed, shaking his head. *“No, not at all. On the contrary, he’s a reliable and efficient*

young man, and I think working with him will be a pleasure, not a burden. After the inauguration, I sent him back to prepare the Division for full inspection — and now I'm giving them some space to get ready in my absence."

"I see. You'd rather see them smart and to attention than running around like headless chickens trying to impress their new Captain," Kensei's expression became one of comprehension. "Still, it's a funny place to walk out to, The Academy. It must be two hundred years or more together since you were here as a student — does it have that great a hold on you?"

"Three, I think. But my time at the Academy was... interesting," Rose pursed his lips. "I actually walked this way to visit the grave of an old... mentor, I suppose you'd call it, and I was heading back. I just paused to remind myself of the local scenery. Seireitei is still so beautiful at this time of the year, and after living in a warehouse for so very long as we have, I suppose I wanted to absorb that beauty once more. It's remained despite our absence, as though it's been awaiting our return. Don't you feel that?"

"Dare say I hadn't thought much of it," Kensei said briskly, shrugging his shoulders, and Rose shot him an amused look.

"It was a foolish question," he acknowledged. "What about you — why are you here? If it's been three centuries since I left this place, it must be even more for you."

"Came looking for you," was the laconic reply, and Rose raised an eyebrow.

"To do what?" he asked lightly. "Make sure I wasn't running away, or taking off to hide from the strain of returning to active service?"

"Idiot," Kensei snorted. "I'm not worried about you doing that... nobody is. But Lisa did say to make sure you didn't lose yourself in rainbow harmonies and psychedelic melodia — whatever the hell that is, and no, don't explain, I don't need to know — when you got back here and saw the sakura in bloom. When I saw you walk out this way, I wondered if she'd hit the nail on the head."

"My mind is full of music at the moment," Rose admitted thoughtfully, "but there's also much too much to do for me to give in to it just yet. I feel the need to establish a bond of trust with my adjutant, and that, for now, is taking priority. He hides it well, but in our conversations so far I've understood the depth of his resentment over Ichimaru Gin's abandonment. That being the case, I must work twice as hard to break down his reserves. A squad that isn't in

harmony is never a good thing — I must have all instruments singing to the same tune.”

“Well, if you take the music crap out of it, I dare say Ninth’s much the same,” Kensei reflected. “Mine’s said nothing, and as you said, he’s done everything impeccably and I think he’s a good lad. In fact, he can’t do enough to please me, at present. Apparently we had some encounter when he was a scrap of a kid under fire from a Hollow, and it’s stuck with him, so he’s respectful and eager to the last degree. But...”

He looked sombre.

“Scars run deep,” he murmured. “You got messed up in this business, but Third never was. It was a coincidental victim of Aizen’s madness. Ninth — and Shinji’s Fifth — it’s different. I lost good men in the field to Touden’s blade before Mashiro and I were pushed over the Hollow line, and Touden’s shadow still lingers over the Ninth. I’m sure Shinji’d tell you the same’s true of Fifth.”

“I suppose I’m not returning to face any particular nightmare,” Rose acknowledged. “You’re right, much as my previous tenure was a stressful one, it had nothing to do with the events of that night. Izuru’s spoken to me about Shinji’s new Vice Captain, but he hasn’t said anything about yours. Maybe they don’t know each other that well — or maybe he’s just not sure what to say.”

“Well, I guess you’ll meet him, sooner or later,” Kensei rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I think the current Vice Captains seem a pretty knit bunch — maybe that’s experiences — and it sounded like he went to Third and Sixth a fair bit to see friends, so probably that’s your... what did you call him? Iz... uku?”

“Izuru,” Rose corrected absently. “Then perhaps I will.”

“Almost certainly,” Kensei looked rueful. “Last night, I caught him out on the front veranda strumming away at one of those musical monstrosities you consider an extension of your body. It seems... he has musical tendencies.”

“He plays guitar?” Rose’s eyes lit up. “Oh, then I shall indeed be interested to meet him! Is he any good?”

“I wouldn’t have a clue. He plucked and twanged in a reasonable way, but I’m not the person to make that judgement. He sounded all right to me, but he didn’t know I was there, and he choked off and stopped when he realised I was,” Kensei replied. “The squad seem to know all about it, but then again they seemed quite relieved that he

stopped, so I dunno. Apparently he's been playing for a while, though... that's what my new Third seat told me, anyway."

He grinned.

"It's easy to forget how much time has passed since the last time we were all here," he added. "This morning, I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the Captain of the Sixth Division and realised it was that impudent whelp of a *bocchan* who Ginrei-dono used to think so much of."

"Yes..." Rose's expression became one of amusement. "I remember... particularly the times he'd stalk around outside First Division when he had a break in his studies and attempt to catch Yoruichi-dono off guard when she came out of a Captain's meeting. It seems funny to see him so austere and adult, now. You'd barely know he was the same kid."

"Well, adulthood tends to hit the Kuchiki like a rock," Kensei said wisely. "Still, though, it was a surprise."

"I think his father would be proud of him, though," Rose ran a pensive hand through his thick wavy hair. "Now that he's stopped trying to kill the Second Division members to prove a point."

"Well, it's not Yoruichi-dono at the helm, now. I was surprised by her successor too — I thought Second was the Shihouin's turf, but I guess not," Kensei reflected. "I was less surprised to see that slick Kurotsuchi in the Twelfth *haori*, though. I guess the science bureau must be all his now Urahara's in the Real World."

"I got that impression, too," Rose agreed. "I don't know, Kensei — some faces have changed and some are the same. And our faces have changed, too — even though we look the same."

"Was that meant to make sense?" Kensei stared, and Rose laughed.

"I mean, we're not the people we were a hundred years ago, any more than Kuchiki-taichou or any of the rest," he explained. "A lot has happened in the time we've been away, but a lot has happened to us, too. And true, there are people we know here, still — Ukitake-taichou, Kyouraku-taichou, Unohana-taichou, the Sou-taichou... they seem much the same as ever. But I wonder if they are."

"Hrm," Kensei's expression became thoughtful. "Probably not. And there are new faces, too. I guess it'll take us a week or three to shake down and know what we need to know about them."

"But the same applies to them with us," Rose pointed out. "For

now, I'm going to focus on Third, and worry about the rest when it happens. They asked us back, so they want us here. I'm going to leave it at that level for the time being. The rest will take care of itself if and when it needs to."

They rounded the corner into the heart of Seireitei's military barrack compound and, as they stepped through the bamboo wood divide, Rose let out a little sigh of contentment, raising his gaze to the blue of the sky.

"You almost sound glad to be back," Kensei remarked, and Rose nodded.

"As though I've come around full circle," he admitted. "I miss the others — I wish they were here too... but I don't want to go back to the Gotei of the past. I can't explain what it is, but something in the air is different. Or maybe it's just breathing it in after so long away — but no, I think it's more than that."

"Hollow Captains being accepted into Soul Society suggests something's shifted," Kensei agreed. "Well, not that I'm complaining. Real World suited me just fine, but here's as good as anywhere to work up a sweat, too."

"Taichou!"

The sound of Kira's voice prevented Rose from responding and he turned to see his new adjutant hurrying across the cobbles towards them, his uniform crisp and smart and his badge gleaming on his upper arm as though it had been especially and rigorously polished that morning. At the sight of his Captain's companion, Kira bowed his head respectfully, pausing a step or two away from the two senior officers.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, sir, but Third Division are ready for inspection," he said, his words polite and proper, and Rose cast him a grin.

"Good. I'm returning now," he agreed. "Well, Kensei? Duty calls... but I hope it won't be the last chance we'll get to talk now we're here."

"Sure it won't be," Kensei replied easily. "You know where you can find me, if ever you want to swap stories or sharpen up that sword of yours with a spar."

With that he was gone, shifting into shunpo with a faint ripple of spirit power, and Rose cast Kira a quizzical look.

“Have I kept you waiting a long time?” he asked anxiously, and Kira shook his head, raising his gaze to meet his Captain’s questioning one.

“No, sir. Everyone is eager to meet you formally, and welcome you properly as Captain of the Third Division, that’s all,” he said promptly. “I said I’d come to meet you, and I’ve left Togakushi in charge in my absence.”

“Togakushi,” Rose’s eyes narrowed for a moment as he dug through his recollections, then, “Togakushi is our Third Seat, I believe...”

“Yes, sir,” Kira nodded. “Togakushi Rikuu, sir. I’ve relied on him a lot in the absence of a Captain — he’s a responsible officer, sir, who takes his duty seriously.”

“Very well,” Rose smiled. “If you trust his authority, so will I. But we shouldn’t keep them waiting any longer, especially since the inauguration ran over a little. They must be apprehensive, and I didn’t have the fortune to meet most of them yesterday, due to manoeuvres. This will be my first encounter with the full Third Division as it currently stands.”

“Yes, sir,” Kira agreed.

“Tell me, Izuru,” as they walked, Rose cast his Vice Captain a sidelong glance. “K..Muguruma-taichou was telling me about his adjutant in the Ninth Division — he seemed to think you were well acquainted?”

“With Hisagi-san? Yes, sir,” Kira looked surprised. “He’s my senpai from the Academy, but we’ve been friends pretty much since my first year there. There were particular circumstances...”

He faltered, his eyes clouding slightly as though he was remembering the circumstances in question, and Rose’s eyes narrowed as he deduced they had something to do with Ichimaru Gin. Deciding it was best not to press the issue when his companion looked like that, he asked instead,

“I believe he has an interest in music?”

“He plays the guitar,” Kira agreed, then, as he made the connection. “Oh! And you do too, sir, don’t you?”

“Among other things, I do,” Rose nodded. “My Flying V and I have come through many trials and tribulations together, you might say.”

“Flying...” Kira looked blank, and Rose chuckled.

“Yes, that’s a better expression,” he murmured to himself, then, aloud he added, “I understand this Hisagi, did you say? has been playing for some time. I have to say I’m curious to meet him and hear it for myself — do you suppose there’s a chance that might happen?”

“I wouldn’t see why not, if Muguruma-taichou doesn’t object,” Kira was taken aback, then a faint smile touched his lips. “The truth is, Hisagi-san doesn’t play a lot in public, but he’d like to do it more. Just there aren’t many other people who share the interest. Actually, his Division members usually ask him to play... well... somewhere else.”

“I see,” Rose’s expression became rueful. “That sounds familiar.”

“Sir?”

“My former Vice Captain,” Rose said dismissively. “No art, no culture... no understanding of the finer things in life. Clearly Ninth Division are of a similar ilk — though Ke... Muguruma-taichou didn’t seem to think he was that bad.”

“He’s... improved,” Kira said thoughtfully. “He got the guitar in the Real World, and to start with he just plucked at it, but one of Soul Society’s Real World allies gave him some help and now he’s knows two or three tunes properly on it at least. I think he’ll be happy when I tell him you’d like to hear him play.”

“I see,” Rose rubbed his chin. “Maybe I can give him some further advice, then. I have played music for as long as I can remember, though I also only encountered the guitar when I entered the Real World — and a hundred or so years of practicing does give you a certain amount of skill.”

“You were playing music without an instrument yesterday,” Kira remembered, and Rose nodded.

“Kinshara and I share a love of melody,” he agreed matter-of-factly. “In a combat situation, of course, that kind of music could be dangerous... lets just say it has particularly decisive offensive qualities, if I choose to use it that way. But it is also nice just to sit and let the harmonies ripple over me. One might say that my spirit power is tuned to the notes of the music scale more closely than to any spiritual spectrum — and I infinitely prefer it to be that way.”

“I’m not sure I understand fully, sir,” Kira admitted, “but Hisagi-san does come to Third a lot — especially since... especially since we were running the divisions on our own. I’m sure he’ll be glad to know he’s still welcome, even though things have changed.”

“People you trust are likely to be people I should see merit in, too,”

Rose observed pensively. “At present, I imagine both Ninth and Third have a good deal to see to — but maybe, when things are more in sync...”

“Yes, sir,” Kira’s dark expression had almost entirely lifted now, and Rose smiled, pausing to glance up at the black slashed Third Division sign as they reached their final destination. A fair haired man with long hair braided back from his face hastened to meet them, bowing his head hurriedly.

“Ootoribashi-taichou, Kira-fukutaichou, the Division is ready for your inspection now.”

“Thank you, Togakushi,” Rose spoke pleasantly, and the man’s head shot up in surprise that the Captain already knew his name despite their only having made the most fleeting of acquaintances early that morning. “If you don’t mind, would you lead the way?”

Author’s Note:

I wanted to write/add this to the original three chapters, so I had 2 chapters in Rose’s perspective and two in Kira’s. The reason I hesitated with this was that I entirely invented Rose’s backstory to keep in with other ideas I had about Rose and other characters, and it’s highly possible that Kubo might contradict this in the manga any day.

But then I kinda thought, this is Fanfic and Rose doesn’t get enough love... and if I don’t upload this, it might be that my backstory for Rose will never get an airing, so what the heck.

Just as a disclaimer, though, anything relating to Rose’s background or pre-Gotei history is my own concept and not based in canon. In my mind, Rose went to school with Lisa, went to Eighth with Lisa, and went from Eighth to Third 2 years before the Pendulum opened. I have zero evidence for this. I just like to think that it was that way based on the Rose/Lisa friendship — for which there is, at least, manga evidence!

I also like to think of him as a former classmate of Aizen because he is a very new Captain around the time Aizen is a Vice Captain. Again, no evidence. It just seems to make nice poetic sense.

And finally, readers of Meifu will realise, maybe, where it is he’s gone to in this chapter. I don’t intend on elaborating on it any further in this omake even if I do write more for it, but I think there’s enough to make it clear...

I might yet write more for this omake, or I might not. Dunno yet. I’m also not sure whether I have Kensei nailed... I’m afraid I find him painfully dull as a character so it was really hard to get into his head for this, even

for a little bit. My apologies to Kensei fans if he doesn't sound quite... right.

5. Stray

Stray

Rose was nowhere to be found.

Izuru gazed up at the sun, squinting as he gauged its trajectory overhead. It was climbing higher with every passing moment, he reflected darkly, a sure sign that time was moving on and it would almost be afternoon. Yet despite the fact Izuru had spent the best part of his morning session mired in paperwork waiting for his Captain, there had been neither hide nor hair of Rose. Ultimately, restless and frustrated, he had left his desk, scouring first the Division barracks for his missing leader, and then, after hearing from the Third Seat that Rose had left the compound some two hours earlier, into Seireitei itself.

The streets were busy with patrols, familiar faces barking orders this way and that, and Izuru stepped back to allow a column of Ninth Division officers through on their way to Rukongai.

“Hisagi-san, have you seen Ootoribashi-taichou anywhere?”

The Ninth Division Vice Captain brought up the rear of the group, and before Izuru knew what he had been intending to do he had raised his voice to ask the question. Hisagi faltered, shooting him a startled glance, then shaking his head.

“We’ve been out on patrol, and we’ve not left Ninth’s allocated areas,” he said apologetically, giving his friend a little shrug. “Has something happened?”

“Mm, no, not really,” Izuru hesitated for a moment, letting out a heavy sigh. “I just wanted to check a report detail with him — I’m still getting used to his system of filing. But it’s not that important. I’m sorry to have held you up on my account — I’ll go look for him somewhere else.”

“All right,” Hisagi shot Izuru an odd look, but to the Third Vice Captain’s relief, he did not ask any further questions. Instead he raised his hand to indicate to his gaggle of followers that they were moving on, and Izuru stood back, watching the neat formation of shinigami march back towards the Ninth Division barracks.

He sank back against the wall of a nearby building, folding his arms

bad-temperedly across his chest.

Where the hell has he got to? He told Rikuu he was going out for a bit and that was two hours ago. Doesn't he realise that there's papers to file and sign and all kinds of other things that need his seal or at least his attention before I pass them on to the higher ups? Now I'm having to scurry around looking for him. I never had to do this when Ichimaru-taichou was in charge. Even on my own, I knew where everything was and how it should all be, but now...

He groaned, reaching up to rub his eyes. A dull ache was settling behind his skull, an ominous omen of another heavy day, and he could feel the tension coursing through his body more and more with each passing minute. He was annoyed — yes, he was, genuinely so, but, as he analysed his own reactions with his usual dour detachment, he knew that his annoyance was not really at the missing Rose. On the contrary, it was anger directed at himself — that he, who for so long had held Third Division's head above water single-handedly, should not be able to remain two hours in his office without worrying about his new leader's whereabouts.

Am I so dependant as all that, that I cling to the first person in a haori who walks across my path?

Izuru assessed himself bitterly.

What's wrong with me? Ootoribashi-taichou has been here a week, and it's not as though he's done much to change the fibre of how Third runs in that time. He's listened, observed and redecorated every single room to which he has a key, but he hasn't interfered with the patrols or the hierarchy. All of that is as its always been... as I've kept it, since... everything happened. Most of the documents in the office I could sign and seal without his seeing them. So why am I so flustered? I barely know the man... why don't I want to let him out of my sight?

But even though he asked himself the question, he already knew the answer. It was there, lurking in the shadows of his thoughts still at every point of the day and night. The fox-like grin of the silver-haired Captain that, one day, had disappeared from his line of sight, never to rematerialise. Ichimaru had died in the real world, leaving more questions than answers and although Rangiku had seen it all, Izuru had not asked, nor wanted to hear about his former leader's final moments. The sting of betrayal was still too raw and deep for him to have overcome it in such a short space of time... and now, even though he knew that Rose was not Gin, he could not help but be worried that his Captain's absence might have a more sinister cause.

I don't want to be abandoned again.

Izuru clenched and unclenched his fists, beating them absently against the wall as he vented his frustration.

It's pathetic and I hate it, but I can't help it. I want to trust him, the same as he's trusted me. But when he vanishes, I don't know... if he's coming back. And that's not something I can explain to him. It's just something that I need to work out within myself... if I even can. I don't want anyone else to know how pathetic I am... this time I want to stand on my own feet, not simply follow someone else's lead.

"Izuru?"

The voice made him jump, swinging around hastily to meet the concerned gaze of Rose himself, and, at the Captain's expression, he felt himself reddening, aware that he had been muttering to himself and pounding his fists against the wall as though he had been loosed from some kind of asylum.

A moment of awkward silence passed between them, then,

"Are you all right?"

Rose's tones were soft and in any other circumstances Izuru would've found them soothing, but in that moment he wanted the earth to open up and swallow him whole. Pushing his hands down against the sides of his *shihakushou* in a futile attempt at nonchalance, he nodded mutely, wishing for words to come to explain himself, but suddenly devoid of even the slightest inspiration. Rose eyed him for a moment, then a thin, slender hand came out to rest on his shoulder, and the lavender eyes bored thoughtfully into his. At this close scrutiny, Izuru felt himself going even redder, but he resisted the urge to pull back, instead sliding his gaze away as though trying to conceal his awkwardness.

Rose sighed, and the hand was loosed from his shoulder.

"I'm sorry. You were looking for me, weren't you?" he appraised finally, and Izuru's gaze jerked up, surprise in his expression. Rose laughed ruefully, shaking his head.

"We're neither one of us quite in harmony with this yet, are we," he murmured, more than half to himself. "I went out to get manuscript paper, that's all. I didn't bring enough back with me from the Real World. Last night I had a dream that left me with this particularly haunting melody, looping through my thoughts and I had to get it down. It took me the best part of the night, but I used up the last of my manuscript, and well, most traders aren't keen at selling the stuff past midnight, for some reason."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Anyway, I thought I would go see if the same store I used to buy

from was still there, and it is,” he added, his eyes lighting up. “I really didn’t intend my errand to take this long, but I got talking with the shop owner, and then time flew by and... well, the sun was as high in the sky as this and you have documents for me to sign and process. I’m sorry, Izuru. It’s been a long time since I was a Captain and I’m not sure I was ever a very practical one, even back then. It might take me a little time to remember that my time isn’t always my own any more... but I’m coming back now. I’ll look at whatever you’ve got put by for me, I promise. My song is more or less drafted out — the best copy can wait till after everything’s handled.”

“Taichou,” Izuru found his voice at last, feeling both relieved and guilty in equal measure at Rose’s frank confession. Despite himself, he managed a feeble smile, letting out his breath in a rush.

“Rikuu said you were on an errand,” he admitted. “I shouldn’t be chasing around after you. You’re my Captain. It’s not my business where you go or what you do.”

“Maybe not, but I could probably be a little more informative,” Rose stifled a yawn, and Izuru remembered that the man had said he’d been up all night. “Well? Your coming all the way out here suggests there’s a small mountain of paperwork building on my desk... am I right?”

“There’s some,” Izuru admitted. “I mean, now that Third has a Captain, I thought... well... it’s usual that...”

He trailed off, and Rose shot him another rueful smile.

“You’ll get used to me, I promise,” he said frankly, causing Izuru to stare at him once again. “I trust by the time you do we’ll still be speaking to each other and you won’t be barricading yourself in your office and making violent threats against my manuscript books like your predecessor. I think we can work well together, but I shall try and be easier to track down. It would be no good in an emergency, would it, if you couldn’t reach me and the Division was under attack.”

Izuru’s gaze drifted back in the direction of the Third Division barracks, and his lips thinned, remembering again that day when he and Rangiku had crossed blades and he had first learned the depth of his Captain’s deception.

“I hope that won’t ever happen, sir,” he said honestly. “I think I’ve seen enough of war to last me several lifetimes, not just this.”

“Mm,” Rose’s own eyes became shadowed briefly, then he shrugged. “But they say war brings forth change and change is a part

of life. We can't alter the past, Izuru, so let's not dwell on it more than we have to. We both have more important duties to attend to — and I'd like to get that last phrase of my piece straightened out before the sun goes down if at all poss..."

He faltered, sending Izuru another sheepish grin, a faint flicker of guilt in the lavender eyes.

"But not until I've finished the paperwork," he amended, and despite himself, amusement touched Izuru's features.

"Third Division is really going to be a lot more musical from now on, sir, isn't it?" he observed lightly, and Rose let out a peal of laughter, nodding his head.

"I'm afraid so," he admitted. "I don't really know how to do things without it, so I'm afraid you're probably going to find me humming or singing or playing at all hours of the day and night. Possibly even when doing paperwork. Chikane-san never did understand that... I find it so much easier to concentrate on all of those things when I'm allowed to let the music reign free. She always tried to stop me, saying it was a distraction, and then things ended up all over the place and she became vexed — but even though nobody seems to believe me, I'm a much more logical soul if I'm able to do things my way."

He shot Izuru a sidelong glance.

"My friends say I'm a music-mad, art-mad idiot, although with the greatest of affection," he added. "Probably it's true, but I promise you it's not that I'm playing music instead of working. I play music during office hours *in order to* work. Paperwork is dry and soulless and I find it hard to concentrate on something that dull. So I try to brighten it up a little, make it easier to swallow. Everything in this world has its own particular place and harmony, even supply forms and deployment releases. Maybe that's hard to believe, but it's so."

His fingers twitched slightly, as though fingering the notes to an imagined tune on an invisible instrument, then he shrugged his shoulders once more.

"That's something quite difficult for other people to understand, I think," he acknowledged in resignation. "But with your love of Basho, I hoped I might persuade you to try. I'd like to start as we mean to go on. I'm not good at doing things in the regimented way other squads seem to favour, and I think it's unlikely that will change. Chikane-san thought that made me impossible to work with and when she stopped my music, I confess I probably became impossible... but I'm hoping that we can avoid that stage and go straight to the harmonious

working partnership that some of my colleagues enjoy.”

“I don’t know anything at all about music, to be honest,” Izuru reflected, as they stepped through the gates of the Third Division to see Rikuu hurrying across the cobbles to greet them. “I don’t know if I’ll understand that side of things at all, since I’ve never played or even thought about playing. But...”

He faltered, unsure how to phrase the next few words, and Rose offered him a knowing smile.

“So long as the Captain pulls his weight and doesn’t make Third look like a cuckoo’s nest, you’ll bear with it?” he asked softly, causing the Vice Captain to flush violently red a second time.

“Sir, I didn’t... I wasn’t... I...”

“It’s all right, Izuru,” Rose interrupted him, and at the faintly teasing look in the lavender eyes, Izuru found himself relaxing. “I said it myself, didn’t I? You might have more trouble getting used to me than the other way around. I have already seen this week that you have most of the affairs of Third Division nicely in order and even if I make a few logistical changes, I don’t think there’s much else to be concerned with. But judging by the fact you came looking for me this morning, I think I ought to say it out loud, just so that it’s clear between us. I go wandering about quite a lot. I like to walk, I like the air and here in Seireitei I get to see life and nature in a way that was so much more difficult in the Real World. I admit, I also get distracted by beauty and harmony, and sometimes I lose track of time. A century is a long time to be in exile, and sometimes I felt as though I was locked in a box with no hope of ever seeing the light of day again. Just because I roam about, though — musically, physically, or even existentially — I have no intention to stray. Seireitei is my home and I will stay here now. I don’t have any regrets about my decision to come back. I’m Captain of the Third Division, and so long as I have this *haori*, I’m always going to find my way back to Third’s barracks,”

He winked, touching the edge of the *haori* as he did so.

“I said my name meant Phoenix Bridge, and it does, but in this case you can consider me a homing pigeon,” he said with a grin. “Third Division is my nest and I have all of you to oversee and, if need be, defend. And besides, I was thrown into exile once without being able to go back and explain to my Division what had happened or why things were suddenly changing. I’m not going to let it happen again. You have my word on that.”

Izuru stared at the Captain for a moment, digesting his words

slowly. So he had seen it, then. He had understood Izuru's reasons for searching, even though Izuru had sought to keep them to himself.

But instead of feeling humiliated by Rose's perception, he felt somewhat relieved.

I'd forgotten, but Ootoribashi-taichou is like me. He was betrayed too. He was taken from his Division, just as Aizen lured Ichimaru away from us. He was abandoned by Soul Society just as Ichimaru abandoned us. He has reasons to put down roots and start over here in relative security, too.

He glanced around him, realising that he had walked a considerable way from Third's base, and that, even if Rose had come from Rukongai, he would have had to have taken a detour to reach this point on his way back home. His brows furrowed as he registered this fact.

Well. Maybe Taichou came looking for me too. Maybe he could sense I was upset — or more likely, maybe he didn't want to be too far from base for too long when everything is still so new for him too. This is Seireitei, where he was born, but it's a Seireitei that's still new to him in a lot of ways. I can't imagine doing that — being pulled out of everything familiar and then thrust back into it a hundred years later with a bunch of people I'd never seen before. Maybe Taichou is looking for stability too... and that's why he came this way. I'm Third Division's Vice Captain, and I know it like the back of my hand. I am that stability... me, and Rikuu, and all the others here. I shouldn't worry about such pointless things. Ootoribashi-taichou isn't like Ichimaru-taichou, and I can believe him when he says that he'll always come back.

6. Mask

6

Mask

It was almost midday.

Rose gazed up towards the sky, gauging the position of the sun through the shade of his fingers. The patrol he had sent out that morning to deal with a Hollow incursion on the southern border of Rukongai would doubtless be sending back word to the barracks soon, and, in his office, the pile of documents and papers that Izuru had left for him to sign had, for once, been completed with surprising speed and efficiency. He had slept well the night before, he reflected wryly, and, as such, had entered his office both early and with a level of focus that was often in short supply when a song was teasing at his senses. Izuru was more tolerant than his previous Vice Captain had been about the haphazard manner of his organisation and his work scheduling, but, in spite of that, he felt a little proud, knowing that, on this occasion at least, his adjutant would return to find no loose sheets lying around to be filed. The intrays were empty, the desks were clean and the members of Third Division not on patrol or on other errands were all hard at work attending to the various chores and duties around the barracks. With nothing at Third to attend to, Rose had left his Third Seated officer, Rikuu in charge, and had decided to take a stroll down to the nearby lake. It was fed by the same water source that surrounded the Thirteenth Division's barracks, but Rose knew that the Captain there was once more in poor health, and he had no mind to disturb his colleague by trampling too close to his land. Instead he took a less well trodden path, winding between the backs of the Tenth and Eleventh Division and out onto open Rukongai road towards the expanses of blue and green which, in a previous lifetime, had always brought him respite in a time of stress and chaos.

Not that I really understood what those things were, then.

He let out a sigh, sliding slender fingers into the folds of his *obi* and ducking beneath the branches of straggling pine trees, making his way to the water's edge. Being careful not to crease or damage the white haori that hung around his shoulders, he settled himself on the grass, gazing pensively down at the smooth, unrippled surface of the lake. The weather had been dry, lately, and thus he had no fear of grass

staining the pristine fabric of the haori. For a while he sat there, watching the faint shadows of fish diving and swimming beneath the water. They were not aware of him, he realised, too intent on their own world to realise that he was watching them so intently from the bank. If he tried to touch them, though, he knew they would swim away; disappearing behind rocks and into crevasses at a moment's notice.

Ripples were like sonic vibrations, and Rose had always been fascinated by the way in which things stirred and lived in the world he inhabited. In the past, the lake had been the inspiration for both poetry and melody, but, in that moment, he saw the dank depths as a limited space, confined and isolated from the world of air and land. The fish did not need him, nor were they interested in him — the same way he had felt about the Real World, before his exile there, and the way that he had imagined Soul Society felt about him, and his companions, during their hundred year absence.

He loosened his fingers from his *obi*, trailing the tips lazily across the surface of the water, and watching as the view of the bottom blurred and disappeared beneath the whirls that span out across the surface. As he had predicted, the fish had pulled away at the sight of danger, but, although he had not yet eaten lunch, Rose had no intention of posing them any danger. Drawing his hand back, he watched as the water slowly returned to its static form, its glittering sheen like a mirror of light embedded into a frame of emerald green grass.

The distorted reflection settled and stopped, and he leaned forward pensively, meeting his own lavender gaze on the surface.

A familiar face stared back, the fluffy strawberry blond hair not as long as it had been in the Real World, but still long enough to be artistic while not impeding the active nature of his duty. He had not changed or aged much in the past century, but the eyes held a greater understanding, and, maybe, acceptance, of all that had happened before. There had been times when he had seen this face, and hated it, rejected it, even... as the face of a stranger cloaked in the uncomfortable folds of a gigai. It had taken a long time to come to terms with betrayal, but an even longer one to accept the monster that had lurked within. Rose had been born in Seireitei, and he had trained from a young age to hold a sword against Hollows. Now, though, he was almost as much Hollow as he was Shinigami — and the distinction had become blurred. Killing a Hollow now was not the same as it was before. It was both more morally agonising and spiritually fulfilling, he thought, remembering the battle in the skies

over Soul Society's Karakura Town, and the Gillian that he had shredded with the vibrations of his Arpeggio reiatsu. There were higher stakes involved, killing one with a spirit that resonated half in harmony with your own, and even the haori that now shrouded his slender body could not fool him that those darker instincts had gone away.

He raised his fingers, his gesture delicate and elegant, as though preparing to begin some kind of musical performance, but instead, he touched his index finger to his brow. Drawing the hand down towards his chin, he felt the now familiar sensation of condensing spiritual energy, and the tight, hard frame of the bird mask as it drew together into a vicious point at the front. He gazed at his reflection again, his gaze running over the curve of the beak and the pristine whiteness of the mask.

He had hated this, too, but now, after all this time, he could see the artistic line and the perfect form that his spirit had created. People had called it many things, but, to Rose, it was the image of the phoenix — the bird from his name that had, somehow, dragged him back from oblivion and death to stand as a Captain of the Gotei once more. The bird had changed his life, both destroying it and saving it in the same instant and, although it had been a long, hard battle, it had been a battle won.

He twitched his fingers together, and, like fragments of light, the mask disappeared. He sighed, watching the spiritual shrapnel disperse on the wind. His hollow self was fleeting as the cherry blossom or the dew, he thought to himself pensively. The mask was precious and beautiful because it was transient and incomplete, just like the life that glittered all around him.

"Yo no naka ni taete sakura no nakariseba," he murmured, brushing his fingers against the blades of grass as though removing the fine reishi dust from his skin. *"Haru no kokoro wa nodokeramashi.* Narihira-sama, as ever, your words engrave upon my heart... without unrest, we would not have beauty, but with such fleeting beauty, we are always aware of the brevity of life and how delicate our existence is."

He leaned back against the grass, closing his eyes as he remembered a time, long since past, where the mask had elicited a different emotion than that of reflection.

The headache was back.

Rose buried his head deep into the rough fabric of the makeshift

pillow, trying to drown out the rough edged screeches that clashed and clawed their way through his spirit. The harmony had been broken ever since he had come to the Real World. To begin with, he had not had a moment of time or energy to devote to such things, caught up in a struggle for life and death that had encompassed his whole being. The dark agony of the inner struggle he had fought with the Hollow that had sought to consume him was now over, but, in the wake of the battle, he had realised something he had not known before.

There was a reason that this power was called 'hollow'. It was because, inside, he was now empty, and the broken fragments of Kinshara's refrain drifted and faded into nothing, their shattered cadenzas little more than an uneven scattering of sounds that no longer knew how to form a melody. The delicate balance of his soul and the music that underpinned it had been ripped asunder by Aizen's experiments into Hollowfication, and, while his fellows had begun to piece together the bits of their former selves, he had not known where to begin.

The melody was gone, and with it, the will to make Kinshara play.

True, he could still release his sword. The long, elegant gold whip still seared out from the hilt at the briefest mention of its name, but when Rose touched his fingers to the glittering surface, the answering note was in the wrong key, and, what had once brought him both pleasure and joy was now a bleak and empty sound, lacking in all spirit and life.

He was hollow. Kinshara was hollow. They were spiritually dead, in all respects — robots in gigai who could perform the functions of a shinigami, but could no longer remember their motivation for doing so.

It would have been better had we died. It would have been better had I died.

The headache would not leave, preventing him from sinking into the deep oblivion of sleep. Languidly he pulled himself into a sitting position, making his way slowly to the window and resting his hands on the grimy sill of the warehouse's upper chamber. On the dusty sand outside, he could see Hiyori and Lisa, clearly involved in some kind of animated dispute, but they were too far for him to hear their words. The cracked and smoky glass of the window resembled the barrier between them and him, since they had come here. While his companions had begun to accept their fate with pragmatism, for Rose, there was nothing but gloom and depression in his heart.

If he even still had one. It was getting hard to tell for sure.

He rested his aching head against the cold hard surface of the window, closing his eyes. In the back of his mind, he could sense Kinshara's spirit, but he did not try to force contact between them. Whereas they had once understood each other without words, now, Rose feared their communication. Kinshara's beautiful, harplike song had become underpinned by the darker, rougher edge of the hunting bird that had taken control of his soul, forcing its bone white features over his own and dragging his spirit power down to a darker level. From childhood, he had learned by instinct every single note, pitch and key change that music could offer, but he did not know this key signature, and he could not make the melody fit.

His music was no longer his, and it had left him bereft and alone.

"Are you going to sulk up here for the rest of your life?"

The rough voice of Aikawa Love made him turn, his fingers instinctively glittering with repelling kidou at the unwelcome interruption. At the expression on his face, Love let out an exclamation of dismay, striding across the room and grasping him by the shoulders before he could draw together the effort to fire the spell.

"Hey, who do you think you're gonna fire that at? We're buddies, aren't we? I'm on your side, and you blow holes in this warehouse, you won't be popular! Right now it's all we have, and there's grey clouds in the distance. Chances are it's going to rain."

"Leave me alone." Rose could not even muster the effort to make excuses for himself, and, as Love tightened his grasp on his friend's shoulders, Rose felt the tension slip out of his body. There was just no point in arguing, or even fighting to get free. There was no point in anything. Not now. Not any more.

There was a moment of silence between them, and though Rose did not attempt to meet his friend's gaze, he knew that Love was eying him thoughtfully, taking in much more than most people realised he was capable of seeing. Their friendship dated back to before the honours of haoris and promotions, and, while they were distinct opposites in character, Rose had always taken courage and comfort from Love's brusque, straight-forward manner and his positive approach. Right now, though, that approach was nothing but a nuisance. Between Love and Lisa's efforts to get him to leave the warehouse, Rose was sure that his lack of sleep and his headaches were being made worse by their unwelcome kind intentions.

"If we do that, you might decide to do something stupid," Love had

clearly not liked what he had seen, for, far from releasing his hold on his companion, he shifted his grip to Rose's arm, reaching across to pick up the discarded and sheathed Kinshara and holding it out. "Here. Come downstairs. We'll spar. This is getting cobwebs on it, and you need the practice. We're all still getting used..."

"I don't want to," Rose pushed Love's arm away, injecting enough force into this gesture to almost make him drop the proffered weapon. "Kinshara and I don't want to. We're not in harmony. There's no point. It's not the same, and I don't see the point any more."

"Well, if you leave it to gather dust, no wonder," was all Love offered in reply, but he reached across, shoving the sheathed Kinshara through the loop in his companion's belt with enough force that Rose visibly winced. "I'm not leaving you up here. You're coming with me, like it or not, so be prepared. You've not eaten enough since we've been here for you to muster energy to fight me, and, honestly, I'm sick of seeing you float around like a ghost like this. We've all been hit by a hammer blow, and you're not helping anyone by acting this way. I'm going to take you down, feed you — by force if need be — and then we're going to talk. And spar. You don't get a choice in the matter. I've decided."

"Hey!" Before Rose realised what was going on, his friend was pulling him firmly and unrelentingly towards the entrance of the room, half dragging him down the broken steps towards the large open hall that comprised the bulk of their current shelter. Work had already begun on expanding the territory beneath the surface, but, for the time being, these holes and plans were little more than unconnected rabbit warrens, the layout of which Rose soon realised was the cause of Lisa and Hiyori's dispute. Their words drifted in from the space beyond, and the hostility in their confrontation only made his headache worse.

"I jus' said that if we ran it that way, we'd have more space!" That was Lisa, and Rose, groaned, covering his ears with his hands.

"Make them shut up," he begged. "If you're going to drag me down here, at least make it quiet. I have a headache, and I don't..."

"You shut up," Love cut across his protestations. "We all have to put up with it. All of it. Everything. Frayed tempers. Disagreements. You can't run and hide from it. This is the reality we live in now. Sooner you wise up and accept it, the better things will be. Lisa and Hiyori are workin' hard. Lisa's on edge because she's worried about you, an' she's taking it out on everyone, so I said I'd come drag you down to the world of the living."

“Living?” Rose finally wrenched himself free from Love’s loosening grip, turning to face his friend with an incredulous look on his features. “This isn’t living. We’re stuck in a world we don’t belong in, and we’re more dead than we’ve ever been. You get that, don’t you? There’s nothing artistic about being a Hollow. There’s no melody in turning into a monster. I don’t want a mask, I don’t want a gigai. I want my music... I want my soul back. Aizen took it from me..and no matter what you do, you can’t bring it back. I can’t hear Kinshara’s melody, not any more. My sword is just a weapon, now. It’s not what it was before. You might be able to move beyond it, but I can’t. I don’t have my music, Love — without that, I’m not alive. Without that, I’d rather be dead!”

The moment the words had left his lips, Rose saw Love’s expression change. Shock, followed by anger glittered in the man’s dark eyes, and then, before Rose knew what was happening, his friend had raised a fist, punching him hard in the chest. The blow was unexpected and not without force, sending Rose stumbling back. He slipped and tumbled onto the ground, winded and bruised, and Love moved to stand over him, glaring down at him with his hands on his hips.

“That hurt,” Rose protested, rubbing his chest, and Love pulled Tengumaru from its place at his side, pushing the sheathed tip forward to touch against Rose’s ribs.

“Of course it damn hurt,” he snapped. “It hurt because you’re damn well still alive, in there. Yes, it’s a gigai, but if I release Tengumaru, I can still make you bleed. Don’t you ever say anything so lame again, you hear me? We’re not dead. We’re here. We’re alive. And you’re giving up. That’s not art, if you want to put it in those words. Aizen didn’t win, dammit. He didn’t destroy us, so don’t you ever damn well say you want to die in front of me again.”

Despite himself, Rose gaped at the uncharacteristic surge of anger in his companion’s reiatsu, and Love sighed, pulling Tengumaru back and sliding it back through the sash at his waist.

“But it is shit, us being here like this,” he added. “We only have each other, now. We don’t know what we’re going to do here. What we’ve really become. None of it, yet. It’s all too new. And Aizen... right now, we can only leave that be, but you must know it’s not over. It can’t be... he’s still up there, and he’s not done. One day, that’s going to matter. We know... and what he did to us, we have to learn to find how to make him regret it. It’s all we have left. Everything else is up in Seireitei. All we really have left is revenge — but for now, it’ll do. Don’t you want that? Doesn’t Kinshara want that?”

Rose numbly shook his head.

“Kinshara doesn’t,” he murmured, struggling to get to his feet, still rubbing his chest gingerly. “Kinshara doesn’t, but the other... the... the hunting bird...”

“That does, huh?” Love eyed him keenly, and Rose nodded.

“I guess it does,” he admitted. “but it’s cries hurt my ears. It’s out of harmony. I can’t focus... and... I don’t know what to do, Love. Without my music, I don’t know what I am. Who I am. No matter what else I’ve lost or dealt with, I’ve always... had that.”

“Then we need to find a way to get it back,” Love said simply. “Or, if that doesn’t work, we need to find you new music.”

“New...?” Rose looked blank, and Love grinned.

“I don’t understand a damn thing about it,” he said evenly, “and I’ve never pretended otherwise. But I get that it matters to you, and so it matters — to Lisa an’ to me an’ to all of us. Shinji was talking earlier — in some ways, he’s been screwed more than the rest of us, with Aizen being his Vice Captain and all, but he said that right now, it didn’t matter if we were Captains or Vice Captains before. No more hierarchy. No more titles. We are just ourselves, first names, nicknames, all to the good. We don’t belong with Urahara, and who knows if we can trust him — but we have to trust each other. Look out for each other. It’s the only way we’ll ever one day be in a position to threaten Aizen’s position at all. And he’s right. He’s right, so that means you too. We all fought our Hollows and we all, so far, won, but we’re still only beginning. The rules have changed. The past might have been one way, but this is now. And the old music you had as a shinigami, that’s the past. You’re not a shinigami now. None of us are. We’re something else — a masked militia, not Hollow nor Shinigami, something inbetween. We can make our own rules. And you can make new music to go with it. Can’t you? If you can’t find your music now, it means you haven’t written it yet. That’s all. Right?”

Rose stared at his friend, seeing him for the first time, and Love laughed, clapping his hand down warmly between his companion’s shoulderblades.

“You told me once that manuscript paper was just music that hadn’t been written yet,” he said frankly. “I think you were trying to be clever and poetic, but it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t make it true.”

“Love? Is that you? Is that fluff-haired idiot actually alive still up there? I have something I found, and...”

The door of the warehouse clattered back at that moment, revealing Kensei, his clothes covered in dust. At the sight of Rose, he stopped dead, then offered a wry smile.

"I guess that answered my question. You decided you are part of this after all then, Ootoribashi?"

"Fluff haired... idiot?" Despite his earlier lethargy, indignation rippled up through Rose's skinny body at this clear insult, and Kensei laughed.

"Well, you've been one," he said unapologetically, "but I didn't realise you were here. Still getting used to how these gigai work... anyway, don't kill me. I found you something. It's beat up and trashed, but I guess nobody else wanted it. I thought you might. It's not much... well, to be honest, I don't really know what it is, but..."

He held up a sorry and dirty wooden object in his hand, and Rose took a step or two forwards, hesitating as he ran his gaze over the unusual item.

It was made of wood, the edges curved in a way that reminded him of the violin he had left locked away inside the Third Division's secret compartment, but the body was broader and the sides rounder. A long strip of wood was unmistakably a neck, though, and the remains of what might have been a string was knotted folornly through the holes of what might have been a head, pushed through with wooden keys.

"I found it outside that foreign place on the city outskirts." Kensei scratched his head with his free hand. "People always seem to think I come from there, when they see me. Doesn't matter how well I speak Japanese to them, they still insist on shouting at me in some other language... anyhow, this was dumped in the alley outside. I think some kids were using it to kick about. It looks like that thing you had in Seireitei to me, so I thought you might want it. It's broken up — but, hey, we have time now. And you're not doing anything much else with that time, so..."

He waved it once more in Rose's direction, and Rose hurried to take the damaged instrument from his companion's grip, his disbelief growing with every passing moment.

"It's not the same as Candice," he murmured. "But... you're right, Kensei-kun. It is... an instrument. I never saw one like it before, but... but it definitely looks..."

"It looks like you," Love said bluntly. "Broken and with its music trashed up inside. You fix that up, and you'll fix yourself, too. There's

your challenge. Kensei's bit of junk is your new project. If you can make that play music, then you can make Kinshara play it again, too, right?"

"I... suppose I could try?" despite himself, Rose felt a flicker of emotion stir in his heart, and, with surprise, he realised that it was joy. He raised his gaze to Kensei, a genuine smile touching his lips for the first time since they had arrived in the Real World.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "And I'm sorry. I know... for everyone... yet I've just been worrying about me. You... have been worried too, and it's not like... it's easy for any of us. I'll try more. I promise."

"Then we need to feed you," Love sounded satisfied. "I'm serious about that spar, and Real World food is fine, once you get used to it. Then you can start up on your broken wooden box."

Who would have thought I'd come back to Seireitei, after all of that?

Rose opened his eyes, gazing back down at the lake with a pensive smile.

Well, Kinshara, we found our new music. We grew together, thanks to all of them. I suppose that's when we learned how and who to trust... and not to take everything onto our own shoulders. Sometimes I think Izuru still does that — but it's all right. There's time, yet. Much time, now that Seireitei has peace.

Author's note:

Credit to the ninth century poet, Ariwara no Narihira for the waka poem. A VERY rough translation
(If there were no sakura in the world, with their fleeting blossoms, our hearts in spring would surely never waver.)

Candice is Rose's violin, and it appears in the Rukia novel, "Death Save The Strawberry" — much to Kira's confusion and Rose's delight ;)